

## SPECIAL COMMISSION ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN FORM OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT MAY 2021

### Proposed Deliverance

#### The General Assembly:

1. Receive the Report.
2. Instruct Kirk Sessions to study the Report, especially Section 2, and consider the questions raised as they apply to their own mission strategies, or as part of their process of developing mission strategies.
3. Instruct Presbyteries to study the Report, especially Section 3, and consider the questions raised alongside their plans for reshaping the newly formed Presbyteries and developing mission strategies.
4. Instruct the agencies of the General Assembly to study the Report, and consider the questions raised, particularly around how these will impact the shaping and functioning of the General Assembly and the agencies of the General Assembly and their developing mission strategies, and also the relationship these bodies will have with each other, Presbyteries and the local Church, and in particular instruct (1) the Legal Questions Committee to consider these matters when framing the new Church Courts Act, (2) the Assembly Business Committee to consider these matters when looking at questions of General Assembly reform, and (3) the Assembly Trustees to consider including appropriate reporting on these matters in their report to the General Assembly of 2022.
5. Thank all those who have engaged with the Special Commission.
6. Thank and discharge the Special Commission.

### Report

#### 1. SETTING THE SCENE AND REFLECTION

**1.1** After the far-reaching decisions made by the 2019 General Assembly, to which we can add further decisions made at the online October General Assembly of 2020, the growing sense that the Church of Scotland is going through one of those periodic times of change cannot, and should not, be denied. The effects of Covid-19 and the lockdown have also brought into sharp relief issues that have been pressing on the conscience of the Church for many years. Some will argue that the Church has broadly been living in denial about how things really are, and it was well said that the report of the Special Commission in 2019 simply told us, but more pointedly, what many already knew but had not acknowledged about what needed to be addressed within the Church of Scotland at every level.

**1.2** There is nothing new in this. Every generation in the Church has faced, or failed to face, the realities that the world around it is changing and will continue to change. The structures with which the Church of Scotland has lived for many years, when the denomination was numerically larger and closer to the heart of society, no longer fit our times. Changes have been attempted in previous generations, but the underlying structure was built on a mindset that presumed that, if we did the old things better and 'louder', the people of Scotland would return. What is different now, and in truth has been for several generations, is that numerical decline and secularisation mean that the system itself has become increasingly unsuited for a smaller, marginalised Church. It does not fit mission for the twenty-first century, and there is an increasing lack of financial resource and, more importantly, human resource to make it work. The Church is at a tipping point. This can be seen at every level of the Church's governance. Recent General Assemblies have moved towards a major restructuring of the central administration of the Church, but the process of restructuring is only just beginning to happen in Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions.

**1.3** We may be called to be faithful rather than successful but, underlying our contemporary challenge, is something of a more existential nature. We are being challenged to address, in our time, questions that simply put are: "What is the Church for? What is our purpose? What is our function? What is our relevance?" If, to borrow a phrase from the speech given by the Very Revd Dr John Chalmers in his report to the October 2020 General Assembly on behalf of the Assembly Trustees, we are to prepare to be, "A very different shape of Church... We have to be ready, lean and fit for purpose", we need to continue to ask what that shape is to be, and how is it to be achieved, and where should we begin.

**1.4** The remit given to this Special Commission by the 2019 General Assembly was:

***"To prepare a report on the effectiveness of the Presbyterian form of Church government...particularly in promoting and supporting the mission of local congregations and developing leadership in the Church."***

The report we present is not a blueprint for action. That rightly sits with other bodies who hold executive and budgetary responsibilities granted by the General Assembly and with Presbyteries and congregations.

**1.5** Early on in its existence, the Special Commission came to the view that no system of Church government is inherently more effective in promoting and supporting mission and developing leadership than any other. All systems of Church government have strengths and weaknesses, but honesty forces us to conclude that the greatest strength of any system is the way in which people

work within it, and equally, the greatest weakness is also the same – in other words, its implementation. The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that there is nothing inherent to Presbyterianism which inhibits innovation and creativity. The Special Commission is not persuaded that any other system of Church government would have made the Church of Scotland any more innovative, creative and responsive, or led to it responding more quickly to the challenges faced over the last year. Insofar as the interpretation and implementation of the Presbyterian system of governance sometimes inhibits local mission, this may be due to the method and mindset of engagement within the Church, rather than Presbyterianism itself.

**1.6** The Special Commission has seen its role as raising questions for the wider Church to consider. There are many questions and few answers. The Commission believes that it is for the local Church, the Presbyteries, the General Assembly and the Assembly-appointed bodies to wrestle with the different questions raised within their context. This work has begun in several areas, but there needs to be a wider engagement of the whole Church (not just its Courts) in these discussions.

**1.7** What the Special Commission seeks to set out are principles that might be applied to every expression of governance of the Church: local, regional and national. We also pose questions that need answers, again, in every area of the Church's life. Other bodies associated with the Church are already addressing the 'how to' practicalities and providing 'tool kits'. The Special Commission notes that, even in the last two years, the goalposts have already shifted, and will continue to shift.

**1.8** What this Special Commission offers is the **image of a mirror**. 'This is what we are like; this is what we do and how we do it.' Looking at a mirror requires courage and discernment. Sometimes we see what is looking back at us; other times we become preoccupied by what is behind us; and sometimes we fail to see what is really there.

**1.9** The mirror we offer not only helps us see to ourselves as we are, but perhaps helps us glimpse what God sees in our past, present and, dare we say, future. As we look into this mirror, are we happy with the image that we see? Do we diagnose in that reflection the things that ail the Church and, if we do, are we able to identify the treatment needed to create wellness and wholeness? More importantly, do we have a vision of what wellness and wholeness will look like for the Church after the treatment, in the short, medium and long terms?

**1.10** If the Church of Scotland is currently (or is it continuously?) in a state of flux, *ecclesia reformata et semper reformanda*, (the reformed Church must always be reforming), then might we be brave enough to say that our Church is not dying – it is simply reforming? It is perhaps in that concept of 'simply reforming' that we might anchor ourselves. Is this what our mirror reflects back to us – a Church that needs to reform? Or do we need to go further and wrestle with God's call to our Church to transform, and be prepared to lay down the things that no longer work, and take up the things that will help us, with God, create a Church fit for God's purposes today and tomorrow? Do we give enough time for vision? Structural change is not an end in itself. As we look into the mirror and beyond it, do the structures we plan for and shape at every level of the Church's life meet the criteria that set out to develop faith and accompany people along the road of discipleship? We are not reforming, or transforming, to stay the same. Nor will this process ever be completed. It will evolve as the Church, and the context within which the Church operates, continue to evolve.

**1.11** In this difficult, painful, and unsettling time we must take a long, hard look at ourselves: who we are, what we are doing, and why we are doing it. We need to be aware of our past, but not necessarily bound by it, particularly in a

time of crisis when we may have to take up new ways, and lay old ways down. One of the hard realities is that we do not always get rid of the things in Church life that no longer work towards God's purposes of mission and transformation. The challenge will be to discern what **is not working**, and needs to be let go, and what **might yet work** and be transformed and invigorated. The Stanford economist Paul Romer said that, 'A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.' We live in a time of crisis, but it has been so for some considerable time. For many people, the Covid-19 pandemic has focussed minds and challenged us to realise that there is no going back. Covid-19 has forced us to look at things we did not want to see in our Church, and in ourselves. In this time of danger, there is still a time of opportunity, and work needs to be done. As we are being called to be visionary, we are also called to be courageous, but we would like to add another vital description of what the Church must be in every expression of its existence: we must be **kind**. Any effective form of Presbyterianism must have at its core vision and courage, but also the value of kindness.

**1.12** The work of self-examination, transformation and invigoration has already begun through the actions of the Assembly Trustees, the Assembly Business Committee, the Office of the General Assembly, the General Trustees, the Ministries and Mission Review Group and the Legal Questions Committee. The Faith Nurture Forum and the Faith Impact Forum have also been involved in processes shaping their plans. Presbyteries across the land have already begun uniting, or talking about uniting. The field for change is a crowded one and there is a need for these bodies to consult and to work together. In the drafting stages of this report, the Special Commission shared its thoughts and questions with a number of these bodies.

**1.13** Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation of the Church of Scotland, a Church structure that started basically as a local house Church, and then a congregational gathering, developed comparatively quickly into parallel regional and national manifestations. History does not permit us to turn back time, but it enables us to see where we have been and note why we went there. It also helps us to imagine and then decide where we might go next, and why that path, to the best of our understanding, is the correct one for this time. To that extent, it is maybe helpful to remember that the first description of the early Christian Church was "The Way", (Acts 9:2). Christians, and their Churches, are meant to maintain within their purpose and practice a sense of dynamism. The story of Jesus' life was one of constant peregrination, Bethlehem to Egypt to Nazareth, to Galilee and to Jerusalem, with forays into the uncomfortable territory of Samaria. The same was also true for Paul. To be a Christian involves us in movement. This may be physically from place to place, or within our communities, parishes, nation and world. It may also be in our minds and hearts as our thoughts and feelings move us onwards and about. The image of the Holy Spirit as a bird (the word in Hebrew can sometimes mean either a pigeon or a dove, an emblem of message carrier, or peace bringer, or love), is well captured in the Scottish context by the wild goose of the Iona Community, always on the move. This reminds us of some of the earliest missionary endeavours in Scotland by Irish missionaries, who brought Christianity to that island and who, in later years, as the emissaries of the Abbey of Columba, the *peregrinati*, wandered from their monastery across the country and across much of Western Europe, bringing with them the Good News of Jesus. The World Council of Churches has, for some years, been using the "Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace" to frame much of its witness and work. Across Scotland there has been a rediscovered interest in the practice pilgrimage with several routes developed. Might this be a time to embrace the necessity of movement and exploration in the way our Church works at every level, and what would this look like?

**1.14** Is there something in this dynamic of our faith, this peregrination with the Good News, that might inform what

our reforming Church needs to embody and effect in its local, regional and national expressions? This is not to say that this has not been part of our work. But it may be, after what has felt like a time of necessary introspection brought about by the radical review of recent years, that the time to look outwards and to speak outwards is on our horizon again.

**1.15** The Special Commission reflects, with its mirror image, that this is precisely the opportunity presented by the Five Marks of Mission, first formulated by the Anglican Consultative Council and now widely referred to throughout the world-wide Church. Do we, as a local, regional and national Church, see in the image reflecting back those marks of mission in our being, and in our doing?

**1.16** The Assembly Trustees, in their May 2020 update, drew attention to those Five Marks of Mission, and the Five Marks were welcomed by the General Assembly in the report of the Assembly Trustees in October 2020. They are:

- i. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- ii. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- iii. To respond to human need by loving service
- iv. To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
- v. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

For the Church of Scotland to continue to be fit for purpose in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, these Five Marks must be evidenced at local, regional and national levels. No one size will fit each level, nor will there be conformity of expression across the country. It is how the Church at all levels and in all parts of our country interprets and incarnates the Five Marks that will begin to demonstrate the purpose of the Church and, borrowing the Guild's motto, 'Whose we are and Whom we serve.'

**1.17** Another way of looking at this would be to ask:

- a. What is God's mission in the world, and how are we to join in the mission of God, informed by our understanding and response to the Five Marks of Mission?
- b. How does each individual Christian in the Church see their role participating in this mission, recognising that this is not an abstract Church plan, it is God's plan, and that each individual carries a responsibility for their part within God's plan for God's world and God's Church today? Joined with that mission, together, we become the Church: enabled to love and to care as individuals, as a denomination, and as part of the Universal Church.

**1.18** The Special Commission was also drawn to a reformulation of the Five Marks drawn up by the Anglican Board of Mission in Australia in 2013, which sets them out in more direct language, such that our responsibility as Christians is clear:

1. Witness to Christ's saving, forgiving, reconciling love for all people
2. Build welcoming, transforming communities of faith
3. Stand in solidarity with the poor and needy
4. Challenge violence, injustice and oppression, and work for peace and reconciliation
5. Protect, care for and renew life on our planet.

Whichever way of expressing these essential ideas is preferred by the local, regional or national Church, the call to Christ's people to do and to be something in the image of Christ, and serve within the world, remains clear.

**1.19** The Special Commission would note that, whilst mission was given as part of our remit, mission is an essential but not exhaustive action of the Church today. Worship is the other essential element, being the fuel for all aspects of the Christian life, including mission and this needs to find a place in all levels of Church life. How can worship better inspire members to consider mission as an essential, and readily accessible, aspect of the Christian life, linked intrinsically to their participation in worship? What can we do to balance Church life for members so that mission does not become exhausting and squeeze out the refreshment of life found through participation in worship?

**1.20** An area that affects each level of the Church of Scotland is how each court of the Church relates to the others. If the aim of the process of review is to empower, equip and resource the local Church, some fundamental attitudes need to be addressed and re-formed.

**1.21** There is often a strong sense that our culture has failed to produce defined leaders. At General Assembly, the question is sometimes asked, 'Where are the *big* names?' It is difficult to disentangle this vocalised desire for strong leadership in the Church of Scotland from the equally strongly vocalised desire for autonomy at all governance levels of our polity. Presbytery has sometimes resented what is perceived as 'interference' from the General Assembly, and particularly from the Church Offices at 121 George Street, Edinburgh. Kirk Sessions often resent what is perceived as 'interference' from Presbytery. In previous years, councils and committees have brought to the General Assembly plans, programmes and policies, often excellent in substance, but not always striking a chord with regional or local concerns.

**1.22** Trust is near the centre of our expressed Christian faith, but trust is often a casualty in our Church life at every level. It has often been said that Presbyterianism is a form of institutionalised mistrust. But mistrust is not our sole prerogative. It exists in other Church polities, within our communities, and within national and international contexts. In the world of politics, the late Tony Benn posed five questions for politicians:

1. *What power have you got?*
2. *Where did you get it from?*
3. *In whose interest do you exercise it?*
4. *To whom are you accountable.*
5. *How can we get rid of you?*

It does not require a significant exercise of imagination to apply those questions to our attitudes towards Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries, the General Assembly, '121', Ordained Ministers, Deacons, Readers and Elders.

**1.23** The Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland set out our structure of governance in Article 2:

*The principal subordinate standard of the Church of Scotland is the Westminster Confession of Faith approved by the General Assembly of 1647, containing the sum and substance of the Faith of the Reformed Church. Its government is Presbyterian, and is exercised through Kirk Sessions; Presbyteries, [Provincial Synods deleted by Act V, 1992], and General Assemblies. Its system and principles of worship, orders, and discipline are in accordance with "The Directory for the Public Worship of God," "The Form of Presbyterian Church Government" and "The Form of Process," as these have been or may hereafter be interpreted or modified by Acts of the General Assembly or by consuetude.*

The effectiveness of Presbyterianism as manifested in the Church of Scotland has, for many years, been compromised by a lack of connection between and among local, regional and national that is both robust and responsive. Decisions enthusiastically endorsed by General Assemblies often do

not transfer to the other bodies within our structure. Equally, local and regional initiatives infrequently find a national platform. Our lines of communication are at best intermittent. We do not tend to learn from each other, share best practice, or learn from painful mistakes.

**1.24** From the beginning of our discussion, the Special Commission was of the opinion that the problem is not simply a structural issue. Presbyterianism is no better and no worse than any other form of Church government. Presbyterianism can provide structure, though it needs to work on its flexibility. There are times when Presbyterianism (or any form of Church governance) can be restrictive and slow. It is not for nothing that our chief piece of legislation is called the Barrier Act enacted by the 1697 General Assembly. That being said, the purpose of the Barrier Act is not, ironically, to prevent change, but rather to ensure proper consultation across the Church about change. Presbyterianism can be affirming and enabling. The purpose of Church Law is the proper regulation of the life of the church and to ensure justice and fairness in the conduct of business. It both enables and restricts, and when it is felt to restrict too much, it can be changed by the General Assembly. How might we get this to be better perceived and understood? Presbyterianism is about process, not perfection, though the latter may be our aspiration. Our structure, like any structure, may sometimes make us feel as if we are walking backwards into the future. There can be times when all levels of Church governance become lost in the miasma of nostalgia. Many still long for the Church of fifty years ago and beyond, thirled to the concept of being a mass membership organisation which was as much a social gathering as it was an evangelical or worshipping one. Decline and concern about non-attendance predates the heyday of the 1950s.

**1.25** During World War One, army chaplains came into contact with huge numbers of the unchurched. Chaplains believed that the attitude of those in the Army was fairly indicative of those on the Home Front. Lamentable ignorance and misconceptions about God and faith were seen as a blistering comment on the Church's inability and ineptitude in reaching out to people and teaching them even the basics of the Christian gospel. Soldiers at the Front during the Great War were rarely hostile to the Christian religion, but rather indifferent to what seemed to them to be largely impractical, inefficient and irrelevant. "To them the Church was simply the dullest institution they knew."<sup>[i]</sup>

**1.26** Going back even further, prior to the Disruption of 1843, in the 1820s and 1830s, Church leaders like Thomas Chalmers, particularly through his work in two Glasgow parishes, became increasingly aware of the massive societal changes wrought in Scotland by the transformation from a largely agrarian to a predominantly urban population.

*"By the end of the eighteen-thirties, Scotland has ceased to be an integrated, Christian community in any meaningful sense... the old alliance of sacred and secular had broken down... the decay of Christian fellowship was manifest in the increasing alienation of the 'lower orders' from every kind of religious faith and practice. With a few exceptions, the clergy were now religious specialists detached by their single-minded Evangelical enthusiasm from the ideal of omniscience so dear to their Moderate predecessors. The faith had ceased to be the dominating, unifying force in the life of the people; and, in the eyes of many, religion was little more than a matter of personal predilection, a solace or a challenge to the individual rather than a rallying-point for all... Christian living had come to be seen as almost a part time occupation, little related to the world..."<sup>[ii]</sup>*

**1.27** This commentary of nearly two hundred years ago has a distressingly contemporary ring. The Church of Scotland is no stranger to dancing on the fringes of relevance, often through its own actions and decisions. Yet still the Church, with a governance framework largely unchanged from the late sixteenth century, remains. It has

endured religious upheaval, Civil War, industrialisation, two World Wars, previous pandemics, economic depression, the end of the British Empire, and the emergence of the ages of mass communication and the computer.

**1.28** The twenty-first century brings similar problems, and the questions faced by the General Assemblies of 2018, 2019 and 2020 point to the conclusion that the Church of Scotland is once again at a crossroads. Are our priorities in a faith lived out loud? Are our governance structures, and our buildings, fit for purpose? What, where, why and how must change be effected? The Assembly Trustees, in their report to the October 2020 General Assembly, pointed to a structure and style of governance and practice more suited to a larger denomination of yesteryear, with all the duplication and difficulty that entailed. The Trustees were not the first to do so. Imaginative thinking on reforming our systems and practice has been done before. The 'Blue Book' reports of the General Assembly from the 1970s onwards contain a number of forward-thinking, dynamic and missional reports which have been approved by the General Assembly but never implemented fully; for example, the Committee of Forty report in the 1970s, and the Church Without Walls report in 2001.

**1.29** Nevertheless, living through the rigours and challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed that our Presbyterian structure has been, in a number of instances, remarkably flexible at local, regional and national levels. Using the existing structures, some Presbyteries have already merged. Using existing structures, many Kirk Sessions and congregations from different contexts have adapted beyond recognition in their delivery of worship, pastoral care, community engagement, and mission.

**1.30** When it comes to the effectiveness of Presbyterianism, and the promotion and supporting of mission at a local level, the real issue is arguably more often about our **attitude**: the way we behave and choose not to behave. Some might also add that there is an issue about **mindset**. The mission in which we are involved is not simply about 'Church-filling' (though that cannot be overlooked); it is also about giving expression to the Gospel in a culture that grows apace outside the Church. Yes, more could be done with reordered priorities and redirected resources. But the fact that things are being done suggests that, where there was a will, there was often a way.

**1.31** If, as may be the case, there is nothing especially flawed in the *theory* of Presbyterianism and its effectiveness, what is it that we misunderstand about the *practice* of Presbyterianism, and what do we need to understand about it if we are to rediscover and reinterpret what it can do and be in our own time?

**1.32** ***Any system of Church governance will rise or fall depending on the competence and the attitude of the people living within it and working through it. At this point in our Church's story, changes to our structure must be illuminated by the Gospel imperative to live out our faith within the context of our community, to show what we believe and why we believe, through how we live our lives in our community, in our country, and in the wider world.***

**1.33** For this reason, the Special Commission made a conscious decision not to undertake a detailed comparison of other ecclesial governance models. Contact with and experience of other forms of church government has shown that what is true of Presbyterianism is true of other ecclesiologies. All systems have strengths and weaknesses. Depending on the actions, attitudes and competencies of the people who work within them, all can foster innovation and creativity, and all can equally be prey to inertia and caution. Our task is not to reshape the Church of Scotland into the likeness of another denomination.

**1.34** There are existential issues affecting every expression of the Christian Church, including

Presbyterianism. When it comes to effectiveness and the pursuit of active change, it seemed to the Special Commission that there is an uncanny parallel with Sir David Attenborough's view on the climate crisis and the responses which would address it: the world often knows what to do but does not do it. The world knows what the cost will be to address climate change, but is not willing to pay it. Is that an analogy that is being repeated across the Church of Scotland? We know the practices, methodologies and attitudes that we need to change, but we do not move intentionally or decisively towards changing them.

**1.35** What good are the Five Marks of Mission if they are not applied imaginatively, intentionally and decisively across the life and witness of our Church?

**1.36** Addressing issues relating to the central Church organisation, amongst other things, the 2019 Special Commission convened by the Very Revd Professor David Fergusson described the 'silo mentality' found there.

**1.37** If we hold a mirror up so that the whole Church can look at its reflection, is it not the case that 'silo mentality', or cliques at a more local level, are just as prevalent in our congregations and our presbyteries? During the pandemic there have been signs of hope as some congregations have shared technology to continue worship. That being said, our borders tend to be small, and, with few exceptions, our interests and concerns are intensely parochial, and not always helpfully so.

**1.38** The Special Commission wonders if a continuing preoccupation with fixing structures will detract from the work of mission and of being the Church in our communities, nation and world. Whether we tinker with our structures or take much more radical action, the ultimate proof of our effectiveness is not in the machinery of our governance (though to ignore that machinery entirely would be a mistake; we need structures that work). The ultimate proof of our effectiveness is the depth of our personal and corporate devotion to God, the provision of regular opportunity for meaningful worship and the promotion and supporting of mission, provided by local congregations, regional bodies, and the national Church. Our focus has to take into account the 'what' of our governance; but this must not take away from the 'why' and 'how' of what it means for us to be people of 'The Way' in the twenty-first century.

**1.39** Each of the following sections deal with the purpose of the Local Church, the Regional Church (Presbytery) and the National Church (General Assembly and central organisation).

## 2. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH?

**2.1** The congregation is the local expression of the Church. The gathering of the community to live and work with faith and doubt. It is to be the incarnation, through words and action, of Jesus in the everyday. It is to provide pastoral care in a direct way, not only for its members, but for its community. A congregation that has little or no impact upon its community and the wider world has moved away from the ideal of a parish Church. One of the unique selling points of the parish Church is that it resources its membership spiritually, emotionally, and pastorally so that it can reach out to its surrounding community. The effectiveness of a congregation is marked by its faithfulness and its love in action.

**2.2** This ideal is increasingly coming under strain. The age of the time-rich church volunteer has largely come to an end due to changes in work patterns, the increase of the retirement age, and the pressures of regulatory compliance which, though understandably necessary, has often led to a draining of the energy and enthusiasm in volunteers. The local Church is also not immune to the prevailing culture of critical observation rather than sacrificial engagement. We

live in a world that is often more adept at saying what it does *not* want rather than coming up with ideas of what it *does* want. It goes without saying that the Five Marks of Mission would be a useful mirror to hold up to every congregation's life.

**2.3** Arguments are consistently advanced concerning the central role of the eldership and its purposes, and whether this needs to be reviewed and revised to achieve a more missional focus. The General Assembly has periodically debated this important matter, and approved reports in recent years by the Eldership Working Group, but there appears to be little wholesale advance. Indeed, if many elders were to be released from the property, finance and regulatory work that takes up so much time at Kirk Session, would they feel equipped to carry out 'missional work' or sense a call to do so. Again, the Eldership Working Group pointed in this direction a few years ago, but the work required in training and reimagining Eldership for missional purposes has still to be fully embraced. Until that happens, the Commission wonders if elders (along with many ministers and others) never feel quite up to the missional mark we set as an aspiration.

**2.4** Many elders are already working at full capacity, with a variety of interests and responsibilities in their work and personal lives, alongside their involvement in the life of the Church. Many are tired and many are in their retirement years. Reorienting their work towards mission would be a mammoth task, and the definition of that work, already outlined in the work of the Eldership Working Group, remains critical. Specific tasks, with achievable and sustainable goals and results, would need to be identified. We can only train people for things that are trainable and sustainable within existing busy lives. This is not simply about what we say and agree at General Assemblies, nor is it about missional boxes we tick; it is about shaping the actions of the Church around thinking and living missionally. Like so many aspirations around mission, this needs greater and more detailed definition.

**2.5** The day of long-term, open-ended commitment is coming to an end. The Special Commission wonders if the time has come again to consider the period of service elders offer. What would be the impact on congregations where the available human resource is limited? What significance do we continue to place on the importance of local connection and knowledge at parish level? It is worth remembering that a provision for fixed term eldership has been provided for in Act X 1932 section 6, (as amended by Acts XXVIII 1996, II 1998, VII 2000 and I and II 2019) of the General Assembly:

*Notwithstanding the fact that an elder is ordained for life, a Kirk Session may determine, in advance, that the admission of any particular elder to membership of the Kirk Session should be for a prescribed fixed term period. Such fixed term membership may subsequently be extended by agreement of the Kirk Session and with the concurrence of the individual elder concerned. In the absence of such agreed extension, on the expiry of the fixed term period any such elder shall cease to be a member of the Kirk Session, but shall remain eligible for readmission, if so invited by the Kirk Session, at a future date.*

Few, if any, Kirk Sessions who have ordained elders since 2019 will be aware of this provision, and we suspect fewer still will be enacting it. The legislation, of course, cannot be applied retrospectively.

**2.6** Equally, it needs to be considered, if not the elders, then who will be the people who carry out the necessary work of the Church? How is the wider congregation to be engaged? How will ministers, ordained local ministers, chaplains, deacons and readers, as part of their formation and part of their calling, be enabled to play their part? There also remains a considerable amount of talent and skill within the wider membership of our congregations and with those who associate with our Churches but have not become

members. How might the local Church call on the expertise of those who are not elders and office-bearers?

**2.7** Some thought needs to be given to the place and role of the parish. There is no straightforward answer. Communities in Scotland, in both urban and rural settings, have become fluid, geographically mobile, and racially and socially diverse in ways not envisaged when the parish system was established. Many congregations have become more 'gathered' in nature and, in some instances, the connection to the local community in which their parish is situated has become tenuous. Non-churchgoers will have little concept of the 'parish' they live in, though some will identify with a local Church at certain times of the liturgical year like Remembrance Sunday, Christmas and, less frequently, Easter, and maybe also at other times of pastoral need, like bereavement, though many are increasingly turning to civil celebrants instead of their parish Church. Non-churchgoers do not display any desire to associate with their local Church for the majority of the year, which severely limits the extent to which local Churches can engage with those living around them. Many, who could be described as 'spiritual, not religious' or 'believing, not belonging', may have no conception that the Church might provide a space to consider life's great questions or be a place to attend. With aging Church populations, this important work of connection to the local is becoming more challenging.

**2.8** Current reflection about the Church working, not from the centre but from the margins, is interesting, but the Commission wonders what is meant by concepts like 'centre' and 'margin' today. The Church, in reality, is already marginal at best to many in contemporary society. How can the Church more fully accept and embrace that marginality, learning to speak with a prophetic voice from the edge, and to listen those who have been historically marginalised themselves? The Church may have a role to be a listening as well as a speaking and doing body within the community (and nation and world), but the Church needs to be realistic when thinking about what incentive there is for those at the margins, or at the centre, to speak to the Church today. This is more complex than simplistic sloganeering admits and the Church, at its best, has something to offer to both margin and centre and the people who inhabit those spaces. Effective Presbyterianism, listening to the margin and the centre and speaking to both, gains authenticity in these contexts and through these practices. In whichever community the local, regional or national Church operates, we become indigenous by listening to and speaking with the people around us. The Church must therefore continue to respond to what it hears from the margin and the centre.

**2.9** It is worth noting here the commendable work of the General Trustees in pushing congregations to tackle the need for 'well-equipped spaces in the right places' for the twenty-first century. With fewer local authority 'spaces' available to communities, what role should Church buildings play? Is this a form of mission, providing welcome and accommodation, or is it what has been described as 'death-by-letting', with little realised evangelical opportunity? It is clear that the finance raised becomes a significant factor for many congregational budgets and is deployed to sustain the work of the Church. The Special Commission believes that spaces in our communities, where sometimes the Church building is one of the few remaining community spaces, will remain important to both active and passive mission. The phrase, 'ministry of presence' is often used. This has a place within the broader consideration of our effectiveness and our mission. Everything we do about the use of our buildings should be about mission in its broadest sense.

**2.10** Churches with active memberships and an imaginative response to 'parish', played a role in community support during the Covid-19 pandemic, and links were affirmed, or created, with individuals and areas of our community that previously had little to do with Churches. Is this mission? Yes it is: it is the third mark – 'loving service'.

**2.11** The response to 'what is the purpose of the Local Church?' becomes critical when there is unavoidable talk about the creation of larger parish units whereby congregations are united and merged. The Special Commission highlights the following issues that need to be addressed.

**2.12 Training:** for ministers, elders and others involved in the leadership life of the local Church, training will be a significant issue. If there are general calls to 'change' and 'transform', then those skilled in this work will not be found in every congregation. Even for congregations with good human resource, help in clarifying purpose, priority and practice will become vitally important. In instances where there is experience of this work within the broader Church, where and how will opportunities be provided for this knowledge to be shared? We need to realise that, in many instances, the people we are expecting to make changes may be unskilled in this work, or happy with the way things are, or tired because keeping the existing structures afloat has become exhausting. The Church of Scotland has many wonderful people within its membership, but they are rarely the 'magical people' who will have the time, ability or experience to rush forward to volunteer for extra work on top of what they are already doing. General Assemblies may call for radical action, transformative change and fresh expressions, but without resourced, equipped and willing individuals to take the dream forward, little is going to be achieved or realised.

**2.13 Mission:** Perhaps the most painful realisation, which needs saying out loud, is that tongue-tied congregations and their leaders often do not know how to articulate what mission is for them. There are many good news stories, but the Special Commission believes that unless congregations, and particularly their ministers and elders, learn to be specific in their vision-forming, intentional in what they mean about mission in their parish, and realistic in how to put into practice this vision and intention, then mission will often be well down the list behind finance and property.

**2.14** There is help needing to be given, and work needing to be done, to equip congregations in identifying what mission might look like for them, in their area, and amongst the people who live, work, or simply exist within a parish area. Much work currently done by congregations, maybe at an every-day level, will be a form of mission. Mission has societal context – and is shaped by our perception of the Church and the world in which we operate, and will be affected by our attitudes, experience and theology. Is it helpful to define mission not simply as evangelical outreach, but also caring for and serving in fairly mundane ways the people of the parish? All those coffee mornings, baby and toddler groups, music afternoons for people with dementia and their carers, and provision of space to rent or use by groups and organisations may not fill our Churches on Sunday morning or bring people to a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. But mission, in its more accessible incarnation, is as much to be found in the caring for the sad, the lonely, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and the sick as it is in the most eloquent of sermons and the most inspiring of sung praise. The two are not mutually exclusive, but is there something to be found in the engaging of people to do what they can do rather than to shame them about things they have never been expected or equipped to do? How do we recognise that there is a need to create bridges of exploration and opportunity from the living out of faith into the talking about faith? Mission is fundamentally about relationship and friendship. Mission must speak to the head, the heart, and the spirit; it must remember that before preaching Jesus, it must practise Jesus, and that means being a good neighbour.

**2.15 Worship:** During the pandemic many found, through the loss of face-to-face worship and the sense of a community gathering together for worship and for fellowship, that this was more important than they had

realised. Its absence has been a bigger miss than many anticipated. Is there something in this realisation that might help us reach out to those who have not yet stumbled across the possibility of their parish Church and the many things it has to offer or make possible? This is not to dismiss the considerable leaps forward made in using technology, which did much to connect people during the time of isolation and will continue to do so, now that so many have invested in equipment and learned its benefits. Whilst there was much that is good about the use of IT, offering possibilities for inclusion when church attendance is impossible for a variety of reasons, not everyone has access to computer technology and the internet. Thought must be given about how meaningful and sustainable connection and relationship can be maintained with the 'internet diaspora' who watch online worship and on how commitment to the faith and the Church can be fostered and deepened. Clicking on a weblink is not the same as attending a Church in person. The pandemic has shown that there are gains and losses for both real and virtual expressions of the Church.

**2.16 Resourcing:** if the aim and intention of the national and regional Church structure is to resource the local congregation in its general work, then this needs to be demonstrated in the priorities and personnel of regional and national structures. In the new structuring of Presbyteries, are we in danger of simply continuing existing patterns of care and maintenance on a larger geographical scale? It has already been mentioned that there are many fine reports in the Assembly's Blue Books, with wonderful ideas and stirring calls to action. How have these been made accessible to the local Church, and if this has not been the case, then who will be the talented, inspired and focussed people who will get alongside local congregations and turn into reality some of the good work that generations of Blue Books have pointed towards? If the call of faith is something we cherish, then how will it be articulated, where will it be articulated, when will it be articulated, and by whom will it be articulated?

**2.17 Ecumenical relations:** the local level is, of course, where the day to day work of the Church takes place, be that worship, pastoral care, or any number of valuable social projects which seek to address real needs in society. Hundreds of congregations can testify to the spiritual enrichment of sharing worship and to the benefits of working together with Christians of other Churches as they shape the expression of Church life and witness within their communities in a variety of ways. As we encourage consideration of purpose, worship and mission at parish level, how are we to find ways of sharing that conversation and the action which will flow from it with those of other Churches who live, work and worship alongside us?

### 3. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE REGIONAL CHURCH?

**3.1** The regional structure of the Church of Scotland is the Presbytery. The Radical Action Plan approved by the General Assembly of 2019 states that:

*The Presbytery is the gathered life of the Church of Scotland in a particular area. It brings together, in a mutually accountable way and supportive relationship, the recognised ministries and elders representing local Christian communities in parish, education, chaplaincy and national Church administration.*

*In Presbytery, the leaders of the local Church come together to:*

- *Discern the Holy Spirit's leading of the Church in their context*
- *Respond appropriately to Christ's call to follow*
- *Oversee the work of the work of the local Church; and*
- *Be responsible for discipline and good order*

At the very least, a quizzical eyebrow might be raised at these statements: not because the aspiration and theory are untrue but because, for many, the experience of Presbytery is

somewhat different. If these statements from the Radical Action Plan were to be realised, alongside the Five Marks of Mission, the Church of Scotland would go some considerable way to be the incarnation of the change it seeks to be.

**3.2** A feature of the Reformed Church in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century in Continental cities, particularly Geneva, was the weekly meeting of ministers for the interpretation and discussion of the Bible. The 'Exercise', as well as encouraging orthodoxy in Biblical interpretation and theology, also existed to support those who attended. In the decades following the Scottish Reformation in 1560, the 'Exercise' melded with other bodies and became, in time, more akin to the Presbyteries familiar to us, and to undertake executive and administration functions. It is worth noting that, in the two decades after the Reformation, there were already apparent problems in maintaining the existence of the 'Exercise' across the country, based primarily in and around the larger towns.

**3.3** In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, is there a need for Presbyteries, as they are re-formed in smaller numbers, to look again at ways by which the care of their members, spiritually, pastorally and educationally, is to be carried out? Presbyteries will also need to identify what it means to be missional in theory and in practice, particularly as they will play a significant role in enabling congregations to identify what 'mission' will mean to them. Presbyteries need to conduct business, but the concentration on minutiae where business is often routine and uninteresting, and an approach which is often perceived to be heavily legal, seems to be at odds with a more flexible, mobile society. There is a clear need for good practice and good law, but there is a perception by some that we hide behind our legal tradition to avoid effecting the changes we might wish to make. Special Commission acknowledges a balance needs to be struck between imaginative and speedy decision making when a need presents, and good governance which ensures things are thought-out and done decently and in order. This needs addressing, as much in perception as in reality. Again it is worth pointing out that the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that some Presbyteries were perfectly able to effect significant change with the structures we currently have. In discussions during the life of the Special Commission, and from an awareness of discussions ongoing in the newly forming larger Presbyteries, it has become clear that issues around ethos, culture, atmosphere and purpose are being seen as central to this pivotal court of the Church.

**3.4** Another issue that has no easy solution is that Presbyteries, like other parts of the Church government, are largely dependent on volunteers. How do we balance the need for professionalism in an organisation that is largely run and influenced by those who are often serving in an amateur capacity? In our business, we ought to remember that professional business practice must also be balanced by an awareness of our theology and the purposes of the Church. This applies to the local, regional and national levels of the Church.

**3.5** Since the trend is to have fewer but larger Presbyteries, a number of issues need to be addressed. The number of new Presbyteries has not been finalised at the time of writing the report, but the Office of the General Assembly has advised that it is hoped this number will be known by the General Assembly of 2022, and that the new Presbyteries will all be in place by the General Assembly of 2023.

**3.6** There needs to be an imaginative approach to participation. Currently perception of Presbyteries (echoed by the General Assembly) is that they are distant and remote to the majority of elders and congregational members at the local level. This will only increase if Presbytery is simply a larger geographical body (even if there may be fewer congregations).

**3.7** At this early stage, with, so far, three new Presbyteries formed (Aberdeen and Shetland, Fife, and Clyde) thoughts about what is to be devolved from the centre to the Presbyteries are still forming. Unnecessary duplication should be avoided, but areas which need a 'national standard' or for the Church to speak with a national voice should be marked out (such as ministerial assessment and training, ecumenical relations, speaking prophetically in the public forum, Safeguarding, Church Law, and central budgeting).

**3.8** Leadership within the Presbytery remains crucial. What might be the role of the Moderator of the new Presbyteries, given the greater areas needing to be covered, and the greater possibility of providing pastoral and organisational cohesion during their term of office? Should the role of full-time Clerks in the newly created larger Presbyteries be about enabling and resourcing, and, alongside others, should they be involved in planning and delivering future strategy? Should they have an overview of how all aspects of the Presbytery's life and work are being developed, time-lined and supported? Should other officials within Presbytery hold remits for Congregational Development and Education, Mission, Property and Finance? Issues around the accountability of leaders and the decision-making process need proper scrutiny and robust processes to ensure accountability to the Presbytery. The new Presbyteries, with input from the Office of the General Assembly and the Legal Questions Committee, should consider what is practicable and flexible and also consistent across all Presbyteries. A system of dispute resolution must be in place should trust break down between officials and the Presbytery. Proper appraisal systems will also be essential.

**3.9** Would it be important for the structure of new Presbyteries to have a broad consistency with that of the national Church, and also be similarly structured to each other? An effective means of relating work to Kirk Sessions would need consideration. Kirk Sessions will vary in areas and levels of competence. It seems to be good governance that Presbyteries, even in different parts of the country, should function in the same way in their governance. Is there therefore a need for a Presbytery Trustees body, accountable to the wider Presbytery, but carrying out much of the work at Presbytery level similar to that of the Assembly Trustees at national level? Should there be Presbytery bodies mirroring national bodies enabling the regional level of the Church to engage with and support ministries and eldership; to engage with the regional issues as well as international ones; and to address the critical importance of good communication within the workings of the Church and its different structures and levels and also with the world outside the Church in the Presbytery area. The Commission is wary of further levels of committee structure, but acknowledges that a balance must be struck between ensuring work is done and initiatives followed up appropriately, with the imaginative involvement of Presbyters, and consensus around decision making. All of this will become more important as more new Presbyteries are established and as they learn how to work with and learn from each other. It goes without saying that a good relationship between the Presbyteries and the central Church will also be crucial.

**3.10** The October 2020 General Assembly passed a deliverance which stated: "The Church should by default operate with an ecumenical mindset." This is true in all expressions of the Church, across local congregations, Presbyteries and the General Assembly, as all members of the Church, in whatever area they serve, seek to participate in the mission of God. As we ask, 'What is the purpose of the Church?' at the local, regional and national spheres, recognising that these are all simply parts and expressions of the universal Church, we suggest that an openness to working with, helping and being helped by, and learning from other denominations must be evident in every part of

the Church. The regional level is the appropriate level for the planning and delivery of mission, and the Special Commission believes that, as the new Presbyteries come into being, opportunities will open up to coordinate better the expression of mission, ministry and opportunities around the use of buildings across Scotland. More will be said about ecumenical matters in the section about the national Church, but it would be worth noting that the Lund gathering of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order group in 1952 applied a simple question to ecumenical cooperation which has much deeper consequences: "Should not our Churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other Churches and whether they should not *act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?*" This was a probing interrogative to be asked repeatedly and "to be applied to the ongoing, day-to-day life of the Churches."

**3.11** In the short-term, Presbytery planning in relation to the number of congregations and ministries there should be within a Presbytery appears haphazard, and demonstrates what most of us know: Presbyteries in the past and today nearly always struggle to make hard decisions or think strategically, with a few notable exceptions. The need for strategic thinking and planning is never going to go away. Populations inside and outside Churches will continue to shift. How will Presbyteries consistently address this significant challenge and opportunity?

**3.12** At the moment, the Presbytery level in Church of Scotland governance structure appears largely to be unaccountable to anyone other than itself. We believe that a system of accountability, which is as much about sharing good examples and stories as it is about dealing with matters of compliance and good governance, should be devised. Should Presbyteries report annually to the General Assembly? The Special Commission is aware that the Office of the General Assembly, through the Principal Clerk, is involved with this work, particularly with the new Presbytery Clerks. Local Church Review at congregational level has been a fitful reality across the Church, but there are examples of good practice that show it can be supportive, commendatory, rigorous and firm. Presbyteries, particularly as they emerge in their new format, need similar levels of accountability. The Special Commission is aware that two cycles of pilot Presbytery Review have taken place in 2018 and 2019 (and further reference to this is to be found in the Legal Questions Committee report of 2019, section 5). Within this process of Presbytery Review, how will Presbyteries be encouraged to set goals and priorities, and measure them against what benchmarks, and, finally, supported by others, review how progress has been achieved? The Legal Questions Committee retains a commitment to developing legislation for Presbytery Review, and this will be focussing on the new Presbytery structure as it emerges.

**3.13** How will the new Presbyteries be resourced by the central Church in order to resource local allocations? How will the distribution of funding be calculated given the variations in population and geography? Will Presbyteries be free to allocate their resources as they choose, or will there be parameters within which all Presbyteries must function, and similar criteria against which all Presbyteries will be measured? Is it the case that no devolved system will cost less than a centralised one?

**3.14** Good communication strategies will be essential at every level of Church life. Mention has already been made of 'silo mentality' in recent debates about Church reform. The reasons for this are complex, but the effect is often to leave the wider Church membership isolated from any meaningful understanding of and engagement with decision formulation and decision making. The danger of system overload with communication is a real one, but careful thought needs to be given to how Presbyteries communicate with local



congregations, and with national Church agencies. At the heart of Christianity is the desire to share Good News.

**3.15** In terms of enabling mission at regional and local levels, what lessons can be learned from the work of the different chaplaincies, Interim Ministry, Pioneer Ministry, Transition Ministry, Ministries Development Staff (MDS) and the Diaconate? Many of these recognised and valued ministries often work with groups of people who are either loosely associated with the Church or have no association at all. Over the years, the General Assembly and some Presbyteries have considered possibilities around 'fresh expressions of Church', and there has been movement in some areas to enable local mission by way of pioneer ministries. The Special Commission is aware that the Pioneer Ministries project was launched in 2016 with funding for five full-time posts currently working with farming communities, Stirling University students, the arts community in Glasgow, and new and existing housing estates in the east and west of the country. The Commission believes that ordained and lay pioneer ministries merits further application across the Church of Scotland in its new Presbyteries and should be incorporated in forward-thinking Presbytery planning. In all of these matters, whilst efficiency is the value we should be applying, reorganising is often easier than getting on with the work it is supposed to enable.

#### 4. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE NATIONAL CHURCH?

**4.1** We conclude at National Church level, which is the General Assembly, General Assembly agencies, and the national offices of the Church, and this level should also be guided and informed in its work by the Five Marks of Mission. Other bodies – the Assembly Trustees, the Assembly Business Committee, the Faith Nurture Forum and the Faith Impact Forum – will have, rightly, much to say about the purpose and workings of the national Church. The Special Commission offers these comments.

**4.2** The General Assembly should remain the supreme court of the Church of Scotland. We have not seen a model whereby reducing the frequency of Assemblies has proven helpful. Biennial meetings, practised by some sister Churches, have apparently made the supreme body even more remote from other levels of Church governance. That being said, has the time come to reduce the size of our General Assembly, to reflect the size of the Church of Scotland, and also to consider the purposes for our meeting and the format in which we meet? The week-long General Assembly format makes it difficult for working elders to attend, skewing the demographic to the more 'mature' congregational member. This is not particularly new. A former Moderator, Archie Craig, noted in 1962 the description of Presbyterianism as 'government of the old by the old for the old', though the Assembly also had the potential to be a wonderfully representative gathering.<sup>[iii]</sup> The Special Commission wonders if there could be a pattern of shorter, more frequent General Assemblies in the year, something that the General Synod of the Church of England does with its meetings. This is a matter for the Assembly Business Committee.

**4.3** Technology made the October 2020 General Assembly a possibility which, by and large, worked well. Anecdotal feedback suggested that meeting face-to-face and the sense of 'gathering for worship and business' were a sore miss. Though we were 'connected' online, the sense of physical remoteness was palpable. The Commission acknowledges that there remain issues around those disenfranchised because they have no access to the internet. Is this an area where Presbyteries could find a solution? An example from outside the Church can be found in doctors' surgeries, which increasingly are carrying out consultations remotely. There is no reason why some local Churches could not become technology hubs, where people without internet

access can take part in Presbytery and General Assembly meetings.

**4.4** The style of Assembly needs to be addressed, whether it meets in person or online. Some find the Parliamentary style of debate difficult, though we note that engagement at the General Assembly often appears greater than it does at Presbytery level. We also note that, without formalising the process, a form of consensus agreement is already in operation when it comes to the greater part of decision making, and that votes are only taken when it is deemed necessary. The Special Commission wonders if there are ways in which people could share views and participate without the occasional perception of confrontation.

**4.5** How helpful would it be for imaginative, comprehensive and mandatory preparation and training to be put in place for commissioners to the General Assembly by Presbyteries in co-operation with national bodies? Could ways be found to help people, especially those who are attending for the first time, to engage more fully with the processes of the Assembly and thereby increase its effectiveness as a decision-making body for the whole Church?

**4.6** In the process of radical restructuring which the Church is engaged upon, with the establishment of new bodies, it is unclear how these bodies relate to the General Assembly. There are fundamental issues relating to accountability and authority which do not seem to have been addressed. How is an appropriate balance to be struck, for example, between the sovereign authority of the General Assembly and the executive responsibilities of those appointed to be Trustees? A decision-making process that only happens annually can be cumbersome and slow. It is also arguable that, if the Assembly has appointed Trustees and others, shouldn't those individuals be entrusted to get on with their job? However, who then sets the limits of executive responsibility, and the need to practise proper accountability to the sovereign body? The anomaly of wanting to resource, empower and engage the local and regional levels of the Church, yet also establishing necessary Trustee and other central bodies and giving them significant powers, has, at best, birthed a creative tension. At worst, it has distanced the local and regional Church where the Church has said it wants true power to lie, and can be seen by some as a source of friction. At the October 2020 General Assembly, the Special Commission noted calls for central bodies to tell the regional and local Church what the 'targets' were for future planning, and for a potentially creative way forward in the relationship between the central and the regional courts of the Church to be developed. We were aware of questions asked about who should agree such targets, and were also conscious of the long-standing antipathy towards and suspicion of the General Assembly, or '121', or Presbytery evidenced at all levels of our Church's structure. This is an important part of the 'mirror telling us who we are and what we are like'. How do we resolve the fact that there is often a lack of *engaged* will at the General Assembly and Presbytery, where lack of engagement often leads to governance and decision making by default. Many do not engage proactively with decision making unless the proposed decisions affect them.

**4.7** In relation to the role and function of the Assembly Trustees and the other national agencies of the Church, the Special Commission poses the question about how members of these bodies are to be selected in the future. It will remain important that people of the highest quality, with appropriate skills and talents, and a demonstrable commitment to the Church should be selected. But is there some way by which representation from the new Presbyteries can be incorporated when individuals are selected to serve? This is a more complex idea than it looks. If the ongoing issue of relationship between the national and regional levels of the Church is to be addressed, this might be one way in which connection and relationship,

accountability and 'ownership' might be tackled. With the Assembly Trustees, for example, what if, along with Trustees selected for specific skill sets, one Trustee was to be nominated from each of the new Presbyteries? With fewer Presbyteries, would there be some possibility of ensuring representation from all of them on all of the national agencies of the Church?

**4.8** Communication at national and international levels needs further thought and clarification. What is our message, how is it shared, how do we resource those charged with this, and who, in the emerging new structures, are the ones to speak authoritatively? The Special Commission acknowledges this is an area that remains complex within a Presbyterian structure, with spokespeople speaking on what the General Assembly has decided. The Commission is aware of the perennial questions about appointing permanent spokespeople or a figurehead with more executive authority.

**4.9** Set against this is the broad respect and appreciation that other denominations have for the Church of Scotland's conciliar structure which encourages broad participation and debate, as well as decision making. What clarity is needing to be given to empower those holders of office within our existing structures to speak appropriately and timeously as situations emerge nationally and internationally, and to ensure consistency and swiftness of response? The Commission notes that whoever speaks out will invariably not speak for everyone. This is a reality in whatever form of Church governance and ecclesiology is in place.

**4.10** The Commission has already mentioned the importance of communication strategies within Presbyteries. The same applies to the national agencies of the Church and careful thought needs to be given to how communication is to be effected between national, regional and local bodies.

**4.11** The Special Commission firmly believes that decisions taken by the General Assembly, once enacted, should be carried out by Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions. We observe that this is not consistently the case. We wonder how this might be managed better.

**4.12** All levels of the Church's life, local, regional and national, contribute to and benefit from a default ecumenical mindset. Ecumenical relationships exist across the United Kingdom and across the wider world. Discussions with other denominations are best conducted at a national level, as these discussions are often intended to lead to changes in Church law and practice which makes things like sharing buildings, resources and ministry easier and more widely accepted. The national level is also the appropriate level at which to maintain the Church of Scotland's relationships with the ecumenical bodies which provide worship resources and are a locus for shared projects, the fostering of international relationships, advocacy for justice and peace and interaction with governments.

**4.13** The Church of Scotland's interfaith work is currently located within the Faith Impact Forum. The challenges presented by interfaith work are complex and quite different from ecumenical work. For instance, we are not seeking convergence or shared worship with other faiths, but rather a deepening of mutual understanding, friendship and respect. The former placing of interfaith work within the Mission and Discipleship Council understandably raised suspicions among people of other faiths as to the intentions of the Church of Scotland. The Special Commission believes that interfaith work, insofar as it aims to deepen trust, understanding and co-operation, should be a priority for the Church of Scotland. We recommend that some way be found to explore this issue at a national level in order that the local and regional expressions of the Church can be properly resourced to develop work on an interfaith basis appropriately and sensitively.

## 5. CONCLUSION

**5.1** The future effectiveness of Presbyterianism is bound up in the mixture of vision, accountability and decision making. A growing number of people across the Church see this, but there are still many who will bury their heads in the sand and hope for a return to a Golden Age that almost certainly did not exist for the Church. We also need to be aware that, when it comes to the introduction and management of change in any organisation, even well-intentioned interventions can evoke responses from the organisation, or individuals within it, that offset the intended benefits. Sometimes, the harder the push is made, the harder the organisation pushes back.

**5.2** If the transformation many hope, work and pray for within the Church of Scotland is to take place, and be sustained and continue to develop and grow, then the 'buy-in' of all involved will be crucial. In this current time of crisis, headlined by the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen, uncomfortably, many shortcomings of our Church brought to light. The reality is that many of these shortcomings were not caused by the pandemic but existed all along. We have been living on borrowed time. What seems clear is that there is a time and a will to address some of the issues that we have long known exist.

**5.3** We need to be clear that we will not resolve everything, but we could transform something, as we continue the process of becoming the Church for this time. It is important that we acknowledge the perceived and real gulf between local, regional and national expressions of the Church of Scotland, caused by a feeling of distance and disengagement leading to cynicism and mistrust in decision making.

**5.4** The questions we raise, and the answers the Church needs to find, are not simply about transforming structures, but about refocussing on attitudes and priorities. These must have, near their heart, the commitment to imaginative and sustainable mission in every place where the Church exists and has contact. Our story is not one of unrelenting gloom and attrition. Our mission in Christ's name to the world is based on what we have to offer, how we reach out, and how we care. There remains a humble greatness in our Church, not because of the glories of the past, but because of the glories of our Lord Jesus Christ and his message of faith to be lived out, hope to be given, and love to be put into practice. Good work, even in this time of crisis, has continued, but we do need to **CHEER UP** and seek today's possibilities. These will encourage us to focus, not on what we can no longer do, but rather on what we *can* do, *continue* to do, and the new things we will *learn to be able* to do.

**We need to rediscover, and live out again, the joy of the Gospel.**

*In the name of the Commission*

DEREK BROWNING, Convener  
ALEXANDER FORSYTH  
FRANCES HENDERSON  
ALEXANDER HORSBURGH  
MOIRA MCDONALD

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